

The Future of Education in Aceh

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Dr. Darni Daud, a graduate of New York University (MA) and Oregon State University (Ph.D), presented his vision for educational change and innovation in Aceh, a region torn by more than 30 years of internal conflict as well as the tsunami and earthquake disaster at the end of 2004. After returning to Aceh after graduate study in 2000, Dr. Daud first became vice dean of the College of Education and Training, then after one year assumed the post of vice rector of the university for academic affairs. He was installed as rector of Syiah Kuala University in February 2007.

Understanding Aceh's past is key to understanding its present and future, he said. The 30-year conflict left education in a difficult situation; schools and other facilities were destroyed, teachers and officials were killed, and there was a climate of fear which stifled freedom of speech and thought. But the internal conflict was not the end of "Aceh's sadness" as the tsunami and earthquake struck on December 26, 2004 which resulted in a massive loss of life, including faculty, staff and students; over 5000 students were left homeless, parents were unable to pay tuition fees, and there was widespread disruption in the school and university systems.

Consequently, Dr. Daud pointed out, the present task is to focus on training and human development to include critical thinking and to teach the younger generation how to contribute to Aceh.

For the future, there are several "educational paradigms" that should be promoted:

- Open access to information beyond what is normally accepted by the community in Aceh. It is necessary, he said, for Acehnese to understand differences of opinion in order to recover from the limitations on free speech and thought during the conflict period.
- Training people to be more broad-minded and to respect differing viewpoints.
- Promotion of critical thinking and creativity to encourage dialogue, discussion and the cultivation of mutual respect.
- English mastery for which teachers and resource people are needed in the educational system, government agencies and other organizations.

Dr. Daud said that, because of the tsunami relief and reconstruction effort, most Acehnese with English language skills were recruited for high-paying jobs in the international community. Now these people, as well as those who moonlight due to low local salaries, should give back their skills in education and to Acehnese society in general. It is not enough, furthermore, only to listen to higher authority but also to "disseminate knowledge through dialogue and understanding." Thus the future of education in Aceh should be based on democratic values, he concluded.

He went on to explain that there should be broader participation of Acehnese in their society. Because of past alienation, the common people do not feel that the schools "belong" to them. Schools and universities should be "microcosms of society," not "ivory towers," and the development of a "learning

society” should be encouraged. Reading and writing should be encouraged on all levels of society, he said.

Technology and ICT are needed to build “networks of information” to encourage broader perspectives, a democratic academic culture. There must also be efficiency and transparency in the educational system to promote the public’s confidence in it.

Concluding his formal remarks, Dr. Daud explained that the Syiah Kuala University (Unsyiah) Laboratory School, now completing the construction phase, would be different than the usual donor contributions to Aceh reconstruction. Rather than build a facility, then leave, donors to the project and USINDO will have continuing relationships with this model school, which Dr. Daud stressed, would not be an “elite” school for the children of privileged families, but rather would have a student body that is a cross-section of society. Different socio-economic levels would be represented and 35-40% of the students would come from the locality surrounding the Unsyiah campus that were hard-hit by the tsunami. The Lab School would also be a model for integrating ICT into education and developing “networks of relationships” with schools elsewhere in the country and internationally.

The following main points were made during the discussion period:

- Internet technology at the Lab School would be Linux-open source provided by IBM and Oracle.
- One of Dr. Daud’s objectives is to encourage the revival of university-to-university linkages.
- Indonesian universities, according to Education Ministry plans, are becoming more autonomous with greater scope to innovate, develop tailored programs and promote community-based education, including parental involvement and engaging community leaders.
- Regarding the influence of Islamic conservatism, the objective is to “fight intellectually not physically” as religion in Aceh is practiced differently than in the Middle East. Although there are “some groups which are considered radical,” it is necessary to encourage the development of “open intellectual space” that cannot be dominated by these groups and in which there is critical thinking and voices from the local community can be heard.
- “Study circles” and “experiential learning” can be useful to bring together parents and teachers to discuss social issues.
- Unsyiah hopes to be able to graduate 1,100 students a year who have diplomas in basic education or subject matter degrees. It is also necessary to upgrade the skills of existing teachers for the national certification process and to provide better salaries.